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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1548  
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA 0605  
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0243  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 006416

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SUBJECT: STREET CLASHES CONTINUE AS POLITICAL LEADERS  
CONVOKED BY PRESIDENT

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia Butenis, reason para 1.4 d.

¶1. (C) Summary. Street clashes in Dhaka resumed on Sunday as President Ahmed met separately with representatives of the four major parties to seek common ground for finding Bangladesh's next chief caretaker adviser. The ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party, its coalition partner Jamaat Islami, and General Ershad's Jatiya Party have all accepted Ahmed's offer to be chief adviser himself, but the opposition Awami League is stoutly opposed. Saturday's violence, which killed 15 persons and injured hundreds, was largely instigated by the Awami League, which stayed on the streets even after the controversial Justice Hasan announced he would not serve as chief adviser. Vehicular traffic in Dhaka is very light, and many businesses are closed or, like the Embassy, operating with skeleton staffing. Chittagong's Awami League mayor has shut down its port and major roads to Dhaka and Sylhet. End Summary.

Jumping the Gun  
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¶2. (SBU) The opposition Awami League had threatened continuous agitation to paralyze Bangladesh if retired Supreme Court Chief Justice K.M. Hasan took charge of the caretaker government charged with preparing the country for national elections. However, as the parliamentary term of the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party wound down on October 28, thousands of opposition activists jumped the gun and hit the streets of Dhaka and, in smaller numbers, Bangladesh's provincial cities to oppose Hasan and attack political rivals. The violence continued even after Justice Hasan's mid-afternoon announcement that he would not serve as chief caretaker advise. "I was prepared to serve on national interest, but the level of mistrust between the political parties has made my position untenable," he said.

¶3. (SBU) Saturday's unrest included explosions and, for the first time in recent memory, gunfire among rival activists. According to police and media sources, five persons were killed in Dhaka when Awami League activists attacked Jamaat Islami members near the country's national mosque. Another ten persons were reported killed elsewhere in Bangladesh.

¶4. (SBU) The Awami League had charged Hasan and Chief Election Commissioner Aziz with pro-BNP bias and called for replacements enjoying the support of all parties. With Hasan's exit, it says the constitution calls on retired

Justice Amin Chowdhury to be chief adviser, but the Bangladesh Nationalist Party disagrees, saying Amin is unacceptable and that its reading of the constitution means the controversial chief election commissioner, also a retired judge, would be next in line. The ruling party also ruled out Justice Hamidul Haq, another retired judge proposed by the Awami League and who subsequently took himself out of consideration.

¶5. (SBU) Dhaka streets are almost empty of vehicular traffic, especially public transportation. Many businesses are closed or operating with a skeleton staff. Embassy has a liberal leave policy in effect for local employees. The closest a large group of demonstrators came to Embassy property was about 500 yards, when opposition activists tried to attack a branch office of the ruling party near the GSO compound.

¶6. (SBU) Police responded to attacks by both ruling and opposition activists, but generally tried to stay out of the fray. Local papers carried a picture of one policeman whose pants had been ripped off him by Awami League demonstrators.

¶7. (C) In separate exchanges with two senior Awami League officials, Ambassador expressed concern over the violence and the fact that Awami League activists were continuing to foment violence even after it had "won" on Justice Hasan. She urged the Awami League to negotiate, not fight for, its political objectives. The two officials took the point.

President Ahmed Steps Forward  
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¶8. (SBU) The violence prompted President Iajuddin Ahmed to

DHAKA 00006416 002 OF 002

convoke political party leaders to seek an end to the impasse. In a meeting with the secretaries general of the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Ahmed offered himself as chief caretaker adviser, which the Awami League later flatly rejected. At a downtown rally, outgoing Prime Minister Khaleda Zia had urged the opposition to accept whatever formula President Ahmed proposed and called on her supporters to resist stoutly all acts of opposition "aggression."

¶9. (SBU) In an ironic twist, the Awami League began insisting that constitutional provisions for selecting a chief adviser be faithfully observed, the line the ruling party had used to justify the anticipated selection of Justice Hasan. It also complained that Ahmed should have fully considered interim constitutional options for chief adviser (i.e., other judges or a consensus candidate) before jumping ahead to the presidential option. Business leaders urged Ahmed to hand over power to a caretaker government as soon as possible to save the country from prolonged crisis.

¶10. (SBU) In a new round of meetings on October 29, Ahmed met sequentially with representatives of Jamaat Islami, Jatiya Party, the Awami League, and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Afterwards, all but the Awami League indicated support for Ahmed as chief adviser.

¶11. (SBU) President Ahmed will now reportedly address the nation at 1700 to announce that he will be the chief adviser.

A MFA source has confirmed a report that protocol is contacting diplomats for a swearing-in ceremony later tonight. Police and demonstrators have gathered around Bangladesh Television Center, where Ahmed is expected to make the address.

Comment  
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¶12. (C) Dhaka is tense and apprehensive, awash in rumors of new violence and looming emergency rule. With some justice, ruling coalition leaders swear to us that it is not their

people who are rampaging on the streets, and that our criticisms of political violence should therefore be directed squarely at the Awami League, not all political parties. Septel will report Ahmed's address and its cloudy potential for clarifying Bangladesh's volatile political climate.  
BUTENIS